

January 14, 1998

Clinton: Tom Sawyer II

Tells Us How to Spend Tobacco Revenues, Not How to Raise Them

Once again, the decision-makers of the Clinton Administration have made it clear: they are ready and willing to do the easy part — spend the tobacco money — but they want no part of the heavy lifting, that is proposing a tobacco settlement that would raise it:

White House Domestic Policy Assistant Bruce Reed Wednesday told Congress Daily Clinton will not go beyond the five principles for tobacco legislation he outlined this fall. . . "We will work with members of both parties, but we're not going to submit our own bill," Reed said. "We'll have... details on recommendations for spending [tobacco revenues] in the budget."

[Congress Daily, Jan.8, 1998, emphasis added]

This classic Clinton avoidance trait was recently seen in the Medicare initiative he offered earlier this month: Instead of helping to reform the system that faces bankruptcy, he plans to expand it, and is looking to Congress to solve the underlying problem.

Clinton is a veteran at avoidance. When it comes to addressing the tough issues, such as Medicare, Social Security, welfare reform, China's human rights abuses, to name a few, this president is tough to find. Yet when it comes time for a Rose Garden signing ceremony and taking the credit, President Clinton is front and center. This president is like the classic kid who steered clear of the Brussels sprouts and turnips but never missed a dessert.

Avoiding His Job

Forty-one state attorneys general in June of last year reached a settlement with tobacco companies that would reimburse the states for their claimed share of tobacco-related Medicaid costs. Congressional action is necessary to finalize this \$369 billion deal. To grossly understate the obvious, such legislation will be highly complex and contentious. It is natural that Congress would look to the White House to take the lead on proposing and passing such a bill— especially since it is now clear that President Clinton has already made detailed plans on how to spend the revenue.

Yet nothing resembling a legislative proposal ever came from the White House. Instead, they delivered a meaningless set of five principles that virtually any bill formalizing the settlement would have accomplished:

1. A comprehensive plan to reduce youth smoking, including tough penalties if targets are not met;
2. Full authority for FDA to regulate tobacco products;

3. The tobacco industry must change the way it does business; 4. Progress toward other public health goals; and 5. Protection for tobacco farmers and their communities [From the White House Tobacco Legislation Announcement, 9/17/97].

In fact, Senate Commerce Committee Chairman McCain sent President Clinton a letter December 15, 1997, reiterating the importance of White House participation in passing legislation:

“We believe it’s essential that the Administration be prepared to testify with detail and specificity on the terms of the pending tobacco bill, and to make specific proposals regarding whether and how bill language should be modified to most appropriately and effectively achieve federal tobacco policy goals.”

As yet there has been no response to this letter, just as there has been no attempt by the Administration to propose legislation.

But Preparing for the Reward: A Consistent Pattern of Avoidance

However, the Administration is counting on the revenue as his policy adviser’s recent statement makes clear. This hand is being played the same way as the Medicare plan, where President Clinton used scare tactics during the 1996 campaign season but could not be bothered to propose a plan to save the system from impending bankruptcy. He didn’t have a plan then and doesn’t have a plan now.

In 1997 he still refused to propose a serious plan and steadfastly refused to consider three bipartisan proposals to reform the system that had passed the Senate: a \$5-copayment for home health visits, bringing the eligibility age in line with Social Security, and means-testing eligibility (he would only consider this if it were instituted as a tax collected by the IRS). Now in 1998 —before the new commission that is supposed to reform Medicare even has its first meeting— Clinton seeks to expand the program.

Tom Sawyer II: Getting Congress to Do His Work for Him

“Tom appeared on the side-walk with a bucket of whitewash and a long-handled brush. He surveyed the fence, and the gladness went out of nature and a deep melancholy settled down upon his spirit. Thirty yards of board-fence nine feet high. It seemed to him that life was seemed hollow, and existence but a burden.”

[Mark Twain, *Tom Sawyer and Huckleberry Finn*]

In the case of the tobacco settlement, as is the case with Medicare, President Clinton is hoping to get Congress to do his work for him while he rests on the sidelines. Someone needs to remind Clinton that there is more to being president, than just being present.

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